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FOR DOCTRINE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

AIR FORCE DOCTRINE PUBLICATION (AFDP) 3-70 STRATEGIC ATTACK

DEFINITION

Last Updated: 12 July 2019

Strategic Attack (SA) is offensive action specifically selected to achieve national strategic objectives. These attacks seek to weaken the adversary's ability or will to engage in conflict, and may achieve strategic objectives without necessarily having to achieve operational objectives as a precondition.

SA is an approach to war focused on the adversary's overall system and the most effective way to target or influence that system. SA planners should examine the full spectrum of that system: political, military, economic, social, infrastructure, and information in the context of stated national security objectives. SA involves the combination of effects that most effectively and efficiently achieves those objectives at the strategic level. In the Air Force context, SA is a discrete set of military operations aimed at achieving those strategic objectives. Airpower offers a quick and direct means to conduct those operations.

> *"The protection of civilians against the harmful effects of hostilities is one of the main purposes of the law of war . . . Specific rules for the protection of civilians may be grouped into two categories: (1) essentially negative duties to respect civilians and to refrain from directing military operations against them;and (2) affirmative duties to take feasible precautions to protect civilians and other protected persons and objects."*
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> – **Department of Defense Law of War Manual, June 2015 (Updated Dec 2016)**

SA involves the systematic application of lethal and non-lethal capabilities against an enemy's strategic centers of gravity (COG), to undermine the enemy's will and ability to threaten our national security interests.

SA includes analysis, planning, targeting, command and control (C2), execution, and assessment in combination to support achievement of strategic objectives. An analysis of the definition clarifies SA:

✪ "Strategic" refers to the highest level of an enemy system that, if affected, will contribute most directly to the achievement of our national security objectives. It is

not limited to the use of nuclear weapons, although in some instances the weapon most appropriate for a particular set of circumstances may be nuclear. (System: *"A functionally, physically, and/or behaviorally related group of regularly interacting or interdependent elements forming a unified whole."*)[1]

✪ "Attack" entails offensive action. It implies proactive and aggressive operations against an enemy (whether a state, a non-state actor, or other organization) and may be used preemptively and without regard to enemy military force. Attacks may employ kinetic or non-kinetic means, from nuclear and conventional destructive weapons, to forms of cyberspace power like offensive cyberspace operations, in order to create lethal and non-lethal effects.

The aim of SA is to help directly achieve national security objectives by generating effects that significantly influence adversary COGs. SA operations are essentially effects-based and should be planned, executed, and assessed as a unified, adaptive course of action (COA), starting with the desired outcome and working backwards to determine the required effects and actions. It is focused on the objectives achieved rather than the platforms, weapons, or methods used.

SA is oriented on the adversary's system, changing it to conform to our national objectives. SA accomplishes this change by affecting (positively or negatively) the COGs in the enemy (not just military) system that will force the overall system to change as desired in the shortest possible period of time. COGs are the leverage points in the system that, when affected, create significantly more change than would be achieved by affecting parts of the system that are not centers of gravity. COGs can be physical things like leaders, key production, structures, people, or organizations. COGs may also encompass intangible things, such as an enemy's moral strength. Affecting COGs will yield results disproportionate to the effort expended, that is, they will provide the highest payoff (enemy system change) for the least cost (lives, resources, time, etc.).

A center of gravity is defined in joint doctrine as a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.[2] In the context of SA against enemy systems, COGs are focal points that hold a system or structure together, draw power from a variety of sources, and provide purpose and direction to that system. In practical terms, COGs have critical requirements, some of which may be vulnerable to attack—critical vulnerabilities. These critical vulnerabilities may yield decisive points: geographic places, specific key events, critical factors, or functions that, when acted upon, allow commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contribute materially to creating a desired effect. Affecting these decisive points should exploit a COG's critical vulnerabilities in a manner that creates desired effects against the COG itself. SA may often be the function of choice for exploiting adversary decisive points.

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[1] Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*. The understanding of systems is also informed by the conventional dictionary definition: *A regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole...* [*Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 10 July 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/system>.])

[2] Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning*.

SA affects conflict-sustaining resources. While it may often be difficult to directly target an adversary's will, we can often target the means the adversary employs to conduct or continue the conflict. Modern high-technology warfare is resource intensive; the support necessary to sustain it provides many lucrative targets which, when attacked, may help to speed enemy collapse and remove options. This is true across the range of military operations and not just for modern, high-technology combat. The target sets may change, but the principles remain the same.

SA affects the enemy's strategy. Sun Tzu said the best policy in war is to defeat the enemy's strategy; this requires we hold at risk what the enemy holds dear or deny them the ability to obtain what they seek. While other forms of military or national power can also deny the enemy strategic choices, SA can often do so more effectively and efficiently.